

APPENDIX D

CASE STUDY ON THE 'BATTLE OF LEWISHAM' 1977

Introduction

1. On 13 August 1977, what became known as the 'Battle of Lewisham' took place, in which violent clashes occurred during a demonstration by the Lewisham 24 Defence Committee and its supporters, including members of the far-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP), against a march staged by the right-wing extremist group the National Front (NF).
2. This appendix notes the relevant SDS and other reporting and notes before, during, and after the demonstration.

Key dates

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| 30 May 1977 | 21 black youths were arrested in Lewisham for theft and robbery
The Lewisham 24 Defence Committee was formed
The NF saw this as an opportunity to focus on 'the problem of black muggers in Lewisham' (MPS-0733367 2) |
| 2 July 1977 | A march was held under the auspices of the Lewisham 24 Defence Committee
The NF attacked the marchers as they left Clifton Rise (MPS-0733367 2)
Sixty-seven arrests made (Commissioner's Report 1977 MPS-0747812 23)
A total of 56 people subsequently appeared at Camberwell Magistrates' Court charged with various public order offences (MPS-0748282) |
| 13 August 1977 | The Battle of Lewisham |

Establishing the date of the march

3. The first mention of the planned Lewisham march by the NF is in an article from the *South London Press* dated 5 July 1977, although a specific date is not mentioned. NF organiser Richard Edmunds is quoted as saying that it will be their 'biggest ever rally...Everybody will know that the Front is marching. Where we had a couple of hundred people in New Cross on Saturday, we will be talking of thousands for our march' (MPS-0748282).

4. As a result, MPS Commander A8 asked the Commander SB for an assessment of the proposed march. On the 8 July 1977, Commander SB replied saying that it had been confirmed that such a march was indeed taking place but that at that stage, they were 'unable to obtain any details' (MPS-0748283). The same day, a Detective Inspector visited the HQ of the NF and met with Martin Webster (the NF national organiser), who refused to give any more details about the Lewisham march other than that it would be in August (MPS-0748280).
5. The first indication of the date of the march (in the documents published by the Inquiry) is contained in an SDS report likely to be authored by HN354, although it is unclear if this was the first that SB would have been aware of the date. The relevant meeting of the SWP took place on 18 July 1977 (UCPI0000011059). There is a minute dated 19 July 1977 saying that the joint assessment for the march on the 13 August 1977 is included and has been delivered to the Home Office by hand (MPS-0748278). The timing of these documents suggests that the SDS contributed to establishing the date of the march.

Anticipation of violence and disorder

6. A report on the anticipated demonstration by the NF, dated 19 July 1977, states that (MPS-0748279):

Against a background of increasing tension between extreme factions of the right and left it is known that the Trotskyists are aware of the proposal to hold a right-wing demonstration in Lewisham...Initially a campaign to ban the proposed demonstration may be expected and on the day an unusually large turnout of anti-right wingers will counter demonstrate. One thinks that such a show of force could attract in the region of 2000...Violence may be anticipated and so far as the left-wing are concerned, some of that violence may directed specifically at police officers who are thought to show favour to the National Front...

7. Advance reporting from the SDS added value to this assessment and to the information that was already known about the likely violent conflict between the far left and extreme right. See in particular:
 - SDS report dated 6 July 1977 (UCPI0000017537) is likely to have been authored by HN80. It covers a meeting on 2 July 1977 of Lea Valley SWP, who were at the march by the Lewisham 24. It records complaints that many members did not support the demonstration. Increased attacks on members by NF and lack of police response are discussed. It says that in future all members should be mobilised to protect members from NF and prevent police from bringing 'spurious' charges against members. 'Also, in this way, there would be sufficient persons available to effectively crush the National Front by sheer weight of numbers, if necessary using as much violence as had been used by the fascists and the police to date.'

- SDS report dated 15 July 1977 (UCPI0000011019) is likely to have been authored by HN356. It covers a meeting of the Deptford SWP on 8 July 1977 to discuss methods by which public meetings of left-wing groups (Big Flame, Right to Work, and SWP) could be protected from NF attacks. It records the promotion of attacks on members of the NF whilst out of sight of the police.
- SDS report dated 14 July 1977 (UCPI0000017554) is signed by HN368. It says 'Following recent violent incidents involving members of the National Front and SWP at paper sales locations, the latter organisers have decided to pursue its policy of 'driving NF paper sellers off the streets.'
- SDS report dated 18 July 1977 (UCPI0000011059) is likely to have been authored by HN354. It records that a former member of the NF had been recruited in Tower Hamlets and states:

the information gleaned from this man showed that the National Front could be expected to change its tactics in dealing with the SWP. From now on it [illegible] be anticipated that the Front would be armed with missiles at every demonstration. [Privacy] said that this force would be met with even greater force and that all members of the SWP should go to Lewisham for the 'Lewisham 21 Defence Committee' demonstration on 23rd July 1977 and the National Front march on 13 August 1977.

- Report dated 1 August 1977 (UCPI0000011111) has no clear SDS stamp, but can attributed to HN80. It covers a meeting of the Lewisham 24 Defence Committee following demonstration on 23 July 1977 - the culmination of the march with about 100 persons at Lewisham Concert Hall. John Deason is recorded as stating that 'all fascists had to be crushed and that when the NF marched through Deptford on 13 August 1977 they would be so treated; this statement being greeted by loud cheers from the audience'. All anti-fascists groups had to be at Clifton Rise to prevent the NF from marching. 'They shall not pass' was greeted with loud cheers.
- The SDS gained knowledge that the SWP had acquired a squat in Clifton Rise where stewards were due to remain overnight (see MPS-0733365). HN354 stated in evidence that he thinks he knew that had been planned (Transcript 11/05/21 156/2). The SDS Annual Report confirms that this intelligence had been obtained from the SDS (MPS-0728981 14):

Amongst the information regarding numbers and tactics obtained from penetrated extremist groups on this occasion was the fact that an employ house at the junction of New Cross Road and Laurie Grove opposite Clifton Rise would be occupied on the night of 12 August by members of the Socialist Workers Party armed with missiles, intent on attacking the National Front march as it passed its location; as a result this house was searched and cleared by Uniform Police on the morning of 13/08/1977 thereby preventing a planned and premediated act of violence.

- HN353 states that he attended the demonstration in Lewisham and reported on it but that his reports are not included in those produced for him by the Inquiry (Witness Statement MPS-0740413 §20).
- A UCO with real and cover name restriction confirmed in evidence that they had reported prior to the march that the routes would get very close to each other. This had not been a concern prior to the march but was during and after the march (MPS-0748061 §34, 35).
- Geoffrey Craft stated in evidence that reporting by the SDS about the last-minute plans of activists was very important and it was already known that activists could listen to police radio (Transcript 18/05/22 58/16).

During the demonstration on 13 August 1977

8. Further reports were produced by the SDS during the demonstration:

- There is a telephone message signed by HN356 which states that SWP 'heavies' are being moved to Church Street in Deptford ready to attack NF marchers and they will use a disused local cinema (MPS-0733366).
- However, HN354 states that a lot of non-SDS SB officers were also covering the demonstration. The SDS was disappointed that a lot of what they had said had been ignored and situation turned very violent (Transcript 11/05/21 from 168/22). The report (at MPS-0733369 2) states that 'there is no doubt that a large number of coloured hooligans were enjoying the chance to indulge themselves'. HN354 states that the language used is of the 1970s (Transcript 11/05/21 170/15).
- Another UCO who has real and cover name restriction states that 'they witnessed serious violence towards poorly protected police officers which deteriorated into running battles. In both instances, advance and retrospective intelligence was produced about these events' (UCPI0000034307 [35]).

After the demonstration on 13 August 1977

9. Further reports were produced by the SDS after the demonstration:

- Report dated 23 August 1977 (UCPI0000011180) on the CPE (ML) is likely to have been produced by HN13. It records the group revising its tactics in light of the Lewisham demonstration. Of this and other reports following Lewisham, HN34 states that:

it is clear from the minutes that the reports were considered to be important because the violence which was displayed and the discussions within far left wing groups about the use of petrol bombs would indicate that we were moving into a new era and it was important that the police be prepared to deal with this before there was serious injury to officers and/or the public (Witness Statement §103).

- SDS report dated 30 August 1977 (UCPI0000011244) is believed to have been authored by HN80 but may be HN13. It records that a member of the Central Committee of the SWP had, following the events in Lewisham, received a threat from Column 88 that they will burn his house down. The threat was taken seriously as Column 88 were believed to be the most hard-line of Neo-Nazi groups.
10. A number of reports were also produced on what went wrong in the policing of Lewisham and the lessons to be learned:
- Minute 24 from Rollo Watts to Ch Supt E Squad saying that Supt [redacted] (MPS-0748208 7):

is to be congratulated on his comprehensive demonstration de-briefing - a new innovation in my experience, and DAC 'A' (Ops) has already expressed interest in obtaining SB views on police/demonstrators' tactics. SDS are currently compiling a report incorporating their views on this subject and when this is to hand, I will consider the best way of putting our joint views to A8.
 - DI Willingale produced detailed notes following the Lewisham demonstration concerning points made by SDS officers to assist methods of policing future demonstrations (MPS-0732886). These make the following points:
 - 'Whilst the police are not yet the prime target for the ultra left, officers escorting marches are always vulnerable to attack because it is a tenet of extreme left-wing revolutionary policy to undermine the forces of law and order.'
 - Despite the advance warning that trouble was likely 'groups of left-wing supporters and, more importantly, coloured youths were allowed to gather'.
 - There was a lack of leadership and little police co-ordination. The whole of Clifton Rise should have been sealed off before the left occupied it in strength and the NF march was too close to the left wing supporters.
 - Mounted police were an excellent target. 'With the increased threat of violence at political demonstrations, Special Branch should possibly look into ways of keeping a better check on extreme political groups'.
 - As well as the SWP, the CPE (ML) are worthy of attention. One member of the SWP had an air pistol and another a knife.
 - Minute sheet from SB file concerning Lewisham (MPS-0732885):
 - A note by Geoffrey Craft states that:

In conversation with those concerned the point most forcibly made was that the degree of violence contemplated by groups of the ultra-left is escalating steadily. It is generally held that police are facing a new challenge in their efforts to keep political protest within the bounds of the law and methods must be devised urgently whereby violent groups on demonstrations can be swiftly identified, isolated and neutralised.

- In the same document, there is a minute from Chief Superintendent saying that:

what emerges most clearly from these notes is the opinion that the police must now seriously contemplate a change of direction and policy in the handling of public order situations - with emphasis on the necessary specialist training and deployment for such situations; the development of a highly trained elitist force (SPG?) is clearly indicated...we must accept that we are entering now a new ball-game in the field of public protest.